THE AXIOMS

ONE - LIFE IS A SELF-OPTIMIZING MACHINE

Nature is not divine, but demon-like. - Aristotle

Some religious movements, philosophers, and writers have seen life as nothing less than a demonic manifestation. The Cathars and Gnostics come to mind, as do philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Aristotle, Mainlander, and contemporary film makers and writers such as Lars von Trier and Thomas Ligotti. This is not a popular view of life in our optimistic, but very unhappy culture. Nonetheless this theme is probably as old as humanity and comes from some deep sense of the cruelty and futility of life.

We can put a more modern spin on the dynamics of life by considering the forces at play. They are in essence very simple - creatures that are good at survival and procreation become dominant. Life is a ruthless self-optimizing survival machine. It has no morality, takes no account of cruelty and suffering, and efficiently weeds out the weak from the strong. The primary qualities needed by a species, if it is to become dominant, are strength and cunning. So, since these qualities promote the success of a species, we might expect that they become exaggerated in the most successful species - and so it is.

As far as cunning is concerned no species does it better than human beings. Some psychologists believe we have developed language so we can lie more effectively, allowing us to take cunning and deceit to a whole new level. The lie is ubiquitous in life, and indeed life would hardly function without it. Men and women could not seduce without the lie, children would find life too brutal to bear if they were not told lies, and business would grind to a halt without the lie. The ultimate purpose of all this lying is enhanced survival, for the individual and the species. Of course, it is not only homo sapiens that lies, angler fish, venus fly traps, stick insects, and pretty much every species employs the lie to further its survival prospects.

Since human beings are not known for size and muscular strength (chimpanzees for example are several times stronger than the average person), it is obviously our cunning and ability to deceive that we must thank for our dominant position on this planet. This dynamic also plays out within the species. Successful people are often those with the most cunning, using their skill to outwit and disadvantage others for their own advantage. In the mating game men will lie about their resources and resourcefulness to attract a female, and women will use cosmetics and dress to exaggerate their sexuality and reproductive potential. People will often say it's a dog-eat-dog life, but that is being way too kind. Human life is dominated by a level of deceit that no other animal is capable of.

So, the self-optimizing survival machine grinds on leaving a trail of dead, deformed, and injured species and individuals behind it. At the head is the current winner in this race, although the lead is always tentative. At a personal level we need to wise up to these dynamics. This machine has molded our physiology and psychology for its own ends - not for ours. We are anxious, ever vigilant, stressed, forever striving, and used up in the process of trying to ensure our survival. This is how we have been shaped, but thanks to our reasoning capabilities we can moderate and modify the forces that drive us forward and have no regard for the suffering they create.

After considerations of this nature, it may not seem too far-fetched to say that nature is demonic, and it's most demonic protege is the human being - you and me. But to be eaten up with desires, emotional passions, lies, and insatiable ambitions is to truly live in hell. Happily, there is a way out provided we are prepared to pay the ferryman to take us to another shore.

TWO - WE ARE SURVIVAL MACHINES

Suppose humanity is the most successful species on Earth. In that case, it must finely tune its consciousness to the things that promote survival and procreation and similarly be highly sensitive to the things that threaten survival and procreation. Our daytime consciousness must be driven by survival utility and wholly shaped by it. Survival utility implies that this consciousness does not need to represent the world accurately but must provide a survival advantage.

It seems to be true that the only world we know is a representation of the world that our mind creates for us. We cannot know anything other than as a mental representation. As such, it would follow that the nature of our representations is such that they are optimized for survival, since were it otherwise, we would not have survived and become the successful species we are. Nietzsche well describes this utility-driven consciousness:

The measure of that of which we are at all conscious is so entirely dependent upon broad considerations of utility for consciousness …

This shaping of our consciousness by survival utility goes very deep. Even the framework for our experience of the world, namely time and space, is a product of our mind. This was stated by Kant over 200 years ago, and more recently by Donald Hoffman in his book The Case Against Reality where he says:

Our perceptions of space, time, and objects were shaped by natural selection not to be veridical - not to reveal or reconstruct objective reality—but to let us live long enough to raise offspring. Perception is not about truth, it's about having kids.

So, we come back to survival and procreation and the fact that these drives wholly shape the simulation of the world our mind produces. The net result of this is that we live inside a representation of the world that is wholly concerned with survival and procreation and little else. This is easily proved by the fact that the overwhelmingly dominant driver for activity is survival and the acquisition of resources to guarantee survival. In other words, the acquisition of money, healthcare, shelter, food, a social context, a mate, all occupy the main part of the waking day. Even our entertainment in movies and novels is again almost wholly concerned with stories of survival.

Since our waking consciousness is not primarily concerned with an accurate representation of the world, but one that confers a survival benefit, it would be senseless to say that we human beings can know "the truth". We are just not equipped to know "the truth" but only the characteristics of our representations of the world, which are shaped by survival utility.

We live inside our own survival consciousness "bubble" and there is no way to see outside the bubble. This survival consciousness can be seen as a kind of dream. Various traditions call this dream Maya, and Gurdjieff said our daytime waking consciousness had nothing of reality in it.

The obvious question is, how does this affect the way we live? This is best answered through a child's nursery rhyme:

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.

We cannot know what the world is or what we are since we are trapped within our survival consciousness bubble. We can give up on the quest for "the truth" simply because we are not equipped to know the truth of our existence.

This understanding of our entrapment in a survival consciousness is perhaps the most significant of all understandings. It allows us to consider our behavior from a single principle - that of the survival consciousness. We can then modify our lives so that this consciousness does not create the suffering that it might otherwise do. Rowing our boat gently downstream is not an inherent feature of the survival consciousness, but it is something we can learn.

THREE - EMOTIONS MEASURE SURVIVAL STATUS

All our emotional states are driven by one thing; the desire to exist. When our survival status is diminished, we experience the so-called negative emotions, and when it is enhanced, we experience the so-called positive emotions. A diminishing of our survival status, no matter how indirect, creates emotional pain in the form of anger, hatred, fear, depression, melancholy, and so on. Enhanced survival prospects create joy, confidence, excitement, love, enthusiasm, optimism. It's all entirely mechanical, and it is not uncommon for one type of emotion to pass into another: fear into hope or love into hatred, for example.

Because we are so attuned to our survival status, our emotions change all the time. This volatility of the emotional states is unique to human beings because we have a highly developed sense of our survival status. We are aware of our current situation and can imagine any possible changes of status in the future. As a result of this volatility and the ability to imagine future events, we suffer a great deal.

At the root of our emotional nature are pleasure and pain. When our desire to exist is fulfilled, we feel pleasure; when threatened, we feel pain. These are actual bodily states and are not just in the mind. Each emotion will comprise a physical condition; for example, clenched fists if angry, and ideas associated with the state; in the case of anger, maybe the idea of the person we want to destroy since anger is always a desire to destroy the thing that has given us pain.

Our emotional nature is a property of our animal body, and the brain function developed in animals known as the limbic system. The curse placed explicitly on human beings is that we have a highly developed limbic system coupled with a very active conceptual mind. In this way, we tend to exaggerate existential threats and opportunities with resulting anxiety, stress, and intense emotional states.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of our psyche is the notion of a self. Not only do we respond to the environment via our immediate emotions, as indeed does an animal, but our conceptual mind creates the concept of a self, of being a definite psychological entity. This evolution of a sense of self is a master move on nature's part since it motivates us to strive even harder to maintain our existence. Animals seek enhanced survival status and avoid diminished status instinctively. We also do this, but the notion that we have a self causes us to strive to maintain this psychological mirage. The result, yet again, is even more anxiety, stress, and striving.

The living proof that our striving for existence has become dysfunctional is the large number of people taking antidepressants and anxiety medications and the need to escape the very existence we crave through alcohol and drugs of various kinds. This inherent contradiction in our existence; that we desire it while often feeling the need to numb ourselves to it shows the conflict that is an integral part of our psychological makeup. This contradiction is quickly understood when we separate the instinctive and emotional aspects,

which crave existence, and the conceptual mind that looks at our situation and can be less than enthusiastic about it.

If our emotional life is to become tolerable, we need to manage it, and with the appropriate skills and application, this is indeed possible. Either our emotions dominate us, or we dominate them; one is mechanical and the other requires conscious effort.

FOUR - LIFE IS DECAY

Life has the name of life, but in reality, it is death. - Heraclitus

That life is decay is a blatantly obvious but eagerly avoided fact. From conception, every creature is sentenced to death and to a gradual unwinding of its integrity through ongoing decay. We call such decay aging, but we tend to see aging as something that happens when a person reaches forty years of age or an age in that vicinity. The aging process begins at the point of conception.

The fundamental mechanism of life is that it creates many generations of the same decaying individuals. It's such an irony that we call our physical existence life when it is a decay process. If looked at unsympathetically, we can say that life is an iterative process of generating decaying creatures. Since each generation undergoes decay, this iterative procedure is the only mechanism that will ensure the continuation of life. Life can be viewed as a fire that creates its own fuel.

When it comes to human life, we find a strong dissonance between the life of the body and that of the mind. The body has a one-way ticket to eventual death, during which it will progressively decay. The mind, on the other hand, fully aware of but in denial of its fate, acts as though it were immortal. This dynamic is particularly true of young people with their plans and ambitions, never giving a thought to the inevitable endpoint. Despite the denial, the dissonance takes its toll. The illusion that life is going somewhere must be maintained, or like a puppet with its strings cut, most people would lose all motivation. This illusion can become more exaggerated as people grow older and their decaying body signals more loudly that the end of their existence grows ever nearer. They try and cram as much into their life as possible, a kind of desperate attempt to deny the obvious.

The solution to all of this is simple but challenging: we remind ourselves regularly that our life is a process of decay and that it leads exactly nowhere. Most people will find this way too difficult, and it will probably have a depressing effect. However, once our psyche gets over the initial shock, a practice of this nature makes it much easier to live, as our unrealistic expectations of life drop away.

The Bible talks of the "valley of death", and this is precisely what life is: a place where everything around us is dying, and during that process all creatures strive with all their being to create the next generation of dying things, with an offset in time. In the case of human beings, the offset is typically around twenty or thirty years. If someone becomes a great-grandparent, they will see four generations with offsets of twenty years or so. A situation such as this is often a comfort. An older person can see his or her continuation through the younger generation. These dynamics are full of problems, and not least the pain encountered when offspring or grandchildren either create a lifestyle that meets with disapproval or die. This is very problematic ground, but not the topic here.

It is much healthier to see the nature of life from a wholly egotistical perspective. Given the facts, how do I live a life with a minimum of pain and distress?

FIVE - NATURE IS INDIFFERENT AND AMORAL

We find an indifferent universe so repugnant that we create fictitious entities such as a caring God. There is no shortage of evidence that nature is indifferent and yet many choose to ignore it. One hundred and twenty million people died in wars, revolutions, purges, and the like during the twentieth century, and each of them believed they were the center of the universe, and most will have been loved by others. This is misery and suffering on a scale that is hard to imagine and yet the laws of our existence continue to grind along with no consideration of the hell they create.

Individuals will turn a blind eye to the day-in and day-out carnage on this planet if they come to believe that some supernatural power has bestowed a favor, such as recovery from a serious illness. They will tell others, assume a special status, and totally ignore the millions of others who strive and suffer. Such is the human condition that we too are uncaring but dare hardly admit it. And so we fluff up our egos with notions of being a caring and kind person while all the time ignoring the misery that is right on our doorstep.

This indifference of nature, and particularly its indifference toward sentient beings demonstrates that existence as a whole is not cognizant of suffering. Consider animals and the way they treat each other; it is as if they do not recognize that the other is sentient. Animals will eat others, while still alive, and treat the distress and agony of the other with complete indifference. It would seem that only when we come to man do we see empathic behavior and a sense of the suffering of others. Why we should have this ability is something of a mystery since we are incapable of reducing the suffering of most other creatures and it causes us to suffer unnecessarily.

There is a certain beauty to the cold, hard, laws that determine the way we exist. The indifference of the laws of the universe does at least leave no doubt as to what will happen in each situation. Plunging a dagger into someone's heart will kill them every time.

Closely related to this indifference is the fact that nature is amoral. Philosophers and religious folk have struggled for millennia to convince us and themselves that an objective moral code exists. The brutal fact of the matter is that most of us will steal, lie, enact violence and sexual abuse, if we feel we can get away with it. This is what we are: creatures like any other, that will do whatever is necessary to enhance our power and survival prospects. And so we create a state and laws to control human behavior, but these laws are not an appeal to our morality, they instead appeal to our fear of punishment. Without such laws we would make the violence in the animal kingdom look like child's play, and even with the laws we still periodically go to war and carry out the destruction of millions of our species. Spinoza has something to say:

Nature does not frown on strife, or hatred, or anger, or deceit, or on anything at all urged by appetite.

Nature will not allow us to walk through walls, but it will permit the slaughter of millions of human beings in wars, and as Spinoza points out, lies and violence are just an accepted part of Nature. This amorality is linked very nicely with the indifference of Nature in another quote from Spinoza:

Yet that which our reason declares to be evil is not evil in respect of the order and laws of universal Nature, but only in respect of the laws of our own nature.

Nature runs according to its own laws, not ours, and if those laws spell misery and suffering for us then so be it. As always, we need to understand these things so we can organize our life for our own best advantage.

Denying these facts, that the universe is indifferent and amoral, will only lead to more misery through frustrated expectations.

In any case the need for a caring and moral universe is nothing much more than the search for a cosmic mummy and daddy. So, let's grow up.

SIX - NO FREE-WILL

For many people, the notion we have no free-will is perhaps the bitterest of all pills to swallow. It offends their sense of autonomy and belief that nothing and no one can dictate what they do. The understanding that we have no free-will comes easily enough. The world we know operates strictly according to cause and effect. Every effect, such as a decision made, must have a cause. No one doubts this is how the universe operates, from the behavior of atoms through to that of galaxies. Yet when it comes to human behavior, we make an excuse; we make ourselves a special case.

Even today, with mounting scientific evidence that we have no free-will, and the greatest minds concluding we have no free-will, the topic is still hotly debated; such is the resistance to this blatantly obvious truth. So, let us state the precondition for a belief in free-will and then move on to the implications

A belief in free-will is a belief in causeless effects.

If a person believes that things can happen with absolutely no cause, they can claim to believe in free-will. Such a person would then have no right to accept the findings of science, psychology, sociology, economics, medicine, and so on since effects might not have causes. The madhouse might be the destination for a person who believes in causeless effects.

Let's be clear about what is being said here. That you are reading this is not the result of some free act of will on your part; you were never going to do anything differently given the chain of cause and effect that preceded you reading these words. Put in its most devastating form, we can say that we are automatons responding to events both in the world around us and within ourselves.

One of the principal implications of our being automatons is that there can be no praise or blame. If a machine does the only thing it is made to do it seems ridiculous to praise it or blame it for its actions. The Buddhists are right when they say, "no blame." Equally, we should not entertain feelings of guilt, remorse, regret, shame, or responsibility. How can a machine be responsible for its actions? It didn't make or program itself; it is simply carrying out the activities resulting from its construction. Similarly, remorse and guilt are futile emotions that rest on the notion that we had free-will when we did something that we now regret.

While the realization that we are automatons with no free-will might be very damaging to the ego, ultimately, it is a very freeing realization. Of course, some people desperately need us to feel we have free-will because then we can be blamed. Naturally, I'm talking about religious folk and the power brokers in society. Even the people around you will not be happy with you if you say that you no longer entertain feelings of responsibility, guilt, shame, remorse, regret, and so on. So, it's probably best to keep these realizations to oneself and wallow in the freedom that the realization that we have no free-will brings.

To put it another way, we can say that everything happens necessarily. All our decisions and actions were the only decisions and actions that were ever going to happen because of the necessary play of cause and effect. There is no contingency in the world; no should have, could have, would have, or any other sentiments that rest on the notion of a free act of will. Once again, this realization is very freeing

The realization of the fallacy of free-will can have deeper effects and particularly the feeling that we are not autonomous units but that we are deeply connected with the rest of the world through necessary chains of cause and effect.

SEVEN - EXISTENCE HAS NO PURPOSE OR MEANING.

The most beloved habit adopted by humanity is projecting its modes of operation onto the rest of existence. Perhaps the most common form of anthropomorphizing is assigning a purpose to things, even to existence itself.

In our everyday life, we do things with a result in mind. This result is our purpose or final cause, as the philosophers might say. Animals seem to work the same way when they build nests and the like, but it would be a complete mistake to extend this notion of a purpose beyond the behavior of living things.

Perhaps the first mistake we make is to assign purpose to our lives. We are not self-created and, as such, cannot possibly know whether our existence has a purpose or not. It's pointless to speculate, but nonetheless, people do speculate. Religious folk will buy books and listen to talks on topics such as "God's Purpose for You" - as if God has nothing better to do than plot out a course for our lives. This notion that we all have a purpose, collapses when we consider the fifteen thousand or so children who die every day from malaria, polluted drinking water, water-borne diseases, and so on. Was their early, possibly agonizing death a fulfillment of God's purpose for them? If so, we might be better off without such purposes.

Not only do we extend the notion of purpose to our existence, but we also do it for existence in total. Again, religious and spiritual folk are particularly adept at creating such theories, but in the end, it is just anthropomorphizing again. The notion that the universe and existence do not serve a purpose is quite distressing for some people.

Closely related to the notion of purpose is that of meaning. The essence of meaning is that what we do should have some value. Assigning value is a bag of worms since how do we define value? Most people want an objective measure of value and will happily invent one or adopt one that suits their purpose. For many people, family might be the ultimate measure of value and particularly its flourishing. Nothing new here; this is fundamental survival dynamics and the propagation of genes. We serve the forces of life very well if we consider family to be the thing that is of most value and gives life meaning. Other examples of value include acquiring money, power, fame, or anything else that serves the survival drive.

The fact our life has no meaning unless we invent one, and similarly with purpose, is the greatest of all gifts. If life had an "in the box" ready-made purpose or meaning, we would be constrained by those things. As it is, we are indeed free to invent our meanings and purposes if we so desire - but there is a twist.

With one hundred percent certainty, our bodies know what their meaning and purposes are - to survive and procreate. It doesn't go any deeper than that. So, all the efforts that are made in life are usually directed toward achieving these things. On the other hand, our minds might not be wholly satisfied by these basic biological urges, and so it invents its meaning and purpose. These inventions are always trouble since they are of no interest to the body as long as it gets sex and food, and our mind always knows when it is duping itself - sooner or later anyway. The best but most challenging solution to all of this is to accept the meaning and purpose that comes with having a body, but not to fabricate some phony purpose such as "I want to help people." Leave the intellect out of it, and you give it freedom that most people cannot bear. Nature

abhors a vacuum, and so most will invent purpose and meaning to satisfy their ego. Living with the vacuum is infinitely more rewarding than filling it with some phony nonsense.

Ultimately, we must recognize that the very concepts of purpose and meaning are man-made ideas that give us a certain view of life. The universe knows nothing of meaning and purpose, how could it, it does not have a human mind.

EIGHT - NO SELF

When we look inside ourselves, what do we find? The overwhelming answer is thought. It might be objected that we find emotions and desires too, but, these belong to the body. When angry, it is the chest that tightens, and maybe the fists clench. There may be some associated thought of the person you would like to harm but make no mistake about it; the emotion is experienced in the body. It's the same with desires; salivation when presented with some delicious food being a good example. There are usually accompanying thoughts in both emotion and desire, and it is the thoughts that we consider to be activities of the mind.

Our sense of self is founded on the illusion of some inner permanence. If nothing within us were permanent, we would be a stream of thought, but no self to experience the thought. But this statement begs the question as to whether there is anything within us other than thought. As Nietzsche says in his usual terse manner:

"If I analyze the process expressed by the proposition "I think", I get a series of audacious assertions that would be difficult if not impossible to prove; for example, that I am the one who is thinking, that there has to be a something doing the thinking, that thinking is an activity and an effect on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause, that an "I" exists, and finally, that we by now understand clearly what is designated as thinking—that I know what thinking is."

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio believes that our sense of self is located in a small area in the brain stem. When this area becomes damaged, a person tragically loses their sense of self. Memory also fools us into thinking that there is something within us that is permanent.

It is challenging to justify anything within us other than the stream of thoughts that pass through us. As Nietzsche indicates, we assume there is a thinker, but the thinker is invisible and all we are left with is thought.

That there is no little homunculus in our heads thinking was well appreciated by Spinoza. He says:

"... in the mind there is no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, etc. Hence it follows that these and similar faculties are either entirely fictitious or nothing more than metaphysical entities or universals which we are wont to form from particulars."

Our "faculty for understanding" is fiction, and all we ever have is particular thoughts about this and that. The Zen Buddhists appreciated this right from the start. A famous conversation between a zen master and his student in the classic work "The Ceasing of Notions" goes:

Student: "What is called the mind? And how is the mind pacified?"
Master: "You should not assume a mind, then there is no need to pacify ti. That is called pacifying the mind."

The unsettling reality is that we find nothing within us other than thought, but there is no evidence of a thinker. Because we identify with our thoughts so heavily, so we believe that they are associated with something within us that is permanent, an "I", a thinker. But there is no such thing. As Plato and Heraclitus would say - we are a becoming, not a being. We do not exist, and all that does exist is the matrix of phenomena that form the objects of our experience. In any case, our "I" disappears every night during deep dreamless sleep, and as such can be seen as a product of our waking consciousness. I'll let Shakespeare have the last word:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

NINE - NO TRUTH

In everyday life, we know two kinds of truth. Truths of fact confirm some relationship between concepts; for example, the concept sky and the concept blue might be related by the statement "the sky is blue." Logical truths express relationships between assertions. A simple example might be if A=B and B=C, then A=C. But we are not satisfied with these truths; for as long as people have thought, so they look for metaphysical truths that take us beyond the realm of experience. A list of such dearly sought metaphysical questions might include:

· Why is there something instead of nothing?

· Do I have a soul?

· Does God exist?

· What is consciousness?

· What is being?

· Is there an objective morality?

· Does an overall purpose drive life?

· Why do cows have four legs? (maybe not)

As axiom two states, our daytime consciousness is not the least bit concerned with truth but has evolved to optimize our survival and procreation prospects. In any case, what kind of truths are we looking for? The metaphysical truths are simply beyond our reach, and it might be that the questions don't make much sense anyway.

No shortage of spiritual and religious traditions claim they have the answer to some, or all the questions listed above, but all of them require that we abandon our reason and accept dogma. The philosophers have been equally profligate in their assertions about the truth. Most of them have created some kind of ontology, or proofs concerning the simple nature of the soul, and so on. There is a sad fact hiding in all of this. Religious, spiritual, and philosophical folk create their answers to our most pressing questions driven primarily by their own biases. Kant, a pietist, was desperate to show that there is a God, we have a soul, and that we can know freedom. Spinoza's central bias was that everything is one, and his philosophy was

engineered around this central fact. Religious folk have usually swallowed some happy ever after story because they find life unsatisfactory.

It took the genius of Nietzsche to point out what the purveyors of truth have been doing for millennia, namely weaving stories that comply with their own biases. In Beyond Good and Evil, he says:

Little by little I came to understand what every great philosophy to date has been: the personal confession of its author, a kind of unintended and unwitting memoir

We do need to ask ourselves why we are so addicted to "the truth", and particularly the truths that we have no access to at all. The very notion of truth may be a kind of madness. Again, Nietzsche sees it all very clearly:

Given that we want truth: why do we not prefer untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?

As humbling as it may be, the best way to approach all this is to realize that our world, and all that we can know, is limited by our sensibility. Experience is the bedrock of our thinking, and if we try to go beyond it, we end up with unverifiable stories about the absolute, God, spirit, fairies, and aliens. However, there is another side to this coin. When we acknowledge that the world, we know is our mental representation of it, we realize that science, that which naught can be said against, is nothing more than the study of our representations, so there is no great truth here either. It looks like we are cornered, and indeed we are. But when we realize that our quest for metaphysical truth is a fool's game, we can drop it; and once dropped, life becomes so much sweeter.

TEN - THERE IS EXPERIENCE

There are very few things that can be said with absolute certainty, but one of them is that we experience. By experience, I mean everything we experience - thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, desires. The notion that there must be someone experiencing, and an object experienced is also unnecessary, but I'll get to that later.

To doubt that we experience would be even more radical than Descartes doubting that he doubted. Experience is synonymous with consciousness since when we are in deep, dreamless sleep, there is no experience. We are also not particularly concerned whether our experiences are "true". We know rail tracks don't meet in the distance, but it really doesn't matter as a visual experience. It is the fact of the experience that is important here.

The traditional division between subject and object has caused a great deal of mischief. In the context of experience, the subject is the thing that experiences - typically you or me. On the other hand, the object is the thing experienced - a thought, emotion, desire, the body, or a physical object. This duality raises some awkward questions, such as; what is the subject? Schopenhauer would say that the subject is the thing that sees but is never seen. As we will shortly see, there is no need to philosophize around these issues. For most people, the nature of the object can also cause some confusion. While we would not consider a table or tree to be part of us, it is no more minor part of us than an emotion or thought. The table that we perceive is a representation formed by our mind, and we can quite legitimately say that it is "part of me". Traditionally we think in terms of myself and other things; everything that is not connected via the nervous system is other, which creates a world of duality.

So, here is a critical point. Perceptions, sensations, desires, emotions, thoughts all stand on an equal footing as experiences. There is no preference for experiences that we think are "internal" (an idea, for example) and those that we believe are "external" (the smell of a rose, say). The whole of our existence reduces to "there is experience". The phrasing of this is crucial. We do not say "I experience", for to do so would introduce the subject-object duality. We say "there is experience" because phrasing it this way assumes neither subject nor object. Instead of dealing with the subject-object duality, we now have a unity - the world of experience. The experience becomes the starting point instead of being a biproduct of the interaction between the subject (you or I) and an object.

Just in case you missed it, I need to emphasize a particularly weighty point. A thought is an experience in the same way as the taste of chocolate is an experience. Whether you decide to say they are both in your mind or the world is irrelevant - they have equal status as experiences. Unfortunately, our subject-oriented language doesn't help here. Words such as I, me, we, you, yours, reinforce the notion that our world is more than experience and that something experiencing exists. From a practical standpoint, this means we can say "there is anger" or "there is a thought about chocolate." in the same way we say there is a table. This practice is part of a more important topic concerning the correct attitude toward our existence - namely to see experience as self-supporting without a "self".

This approach comes quite close to phenomenology, a philosophical tradition that took shape through Edmund Husserl, although Nietzsche was already on the scent with statements such as:

I maintain the phenomenality of the inner world, too ...

We experience phenomena, and as far as I am concerned, the words phenomena and experience can be used interchangeably. Sartre also expresses this move away from the subject-object duality, with its very undesirable side effect that the subject (you or I) feels isolated in the opening lines of his masterpiece Being and Nothingness.

Modern thought has realized considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it. Its aim was to overcome a certain number of dualisms which have embarrassed philosophy and to replace them by the monism of the phenomenon.

To re-orientate our thinking to that of our existence being experience is challenging, mainly because of our subject-oriented language. But to say "there is anger" instead of saying "I am angry" creates a certain distance that means we do not get so tied up in the notion that we are something.